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Happy Place



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Lottie Curwen, @book.and.a.brew

'I devoured this book over two days. I love that Emily Henry doesn't write to a personal formula'
Micky Barnard, @bookphenomena

'Nobody does it quite like Emily Henry'
Casey McQuiston, *Red, White and Royal Blue*

'Nobody balances romance, humour and serious emotional moments quite like Emily Henry, and *Happy Place* is the perfect example – I loved every second!'
Tilly, @TillyLovesBooks

'I have loved every Emily Henry book and this was no exception! The characters are brilliant, the dialogue is witty and I fell in love with it just like I knew I would!'
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Ellie, @_ellieslibrary

'*Happy Place* feels like all of Emily Henry's
books mixed together, in the best way!'
Leah, @lbhreads

'Emily Henry's books should be prescribed. Not only will
they make you happy, her latest may just make you fall in
love with falling in love again . . . Absolutely dreamy'
Woman's Weekly

'An emotional yet enjoyable read that had me
reflecting on my own happy place'
Mahbuba Bilkis, @bilkandbooks

'Emily Henry redefined romance for me and what
it is to love. *Happy Place* became my happy place
filled with family, loss, friendship and a big heaping of
Emily Henry's signature love stories, this book
made me love love that much more'
Coco, @Cultofbooks

'Sizzling . . . Henry executes some delicious
screwball scene-setting and zingy dialogue'
Sunday Times

'*Happy Place* is a book that will make you fall in
love with falling in love. So quintessentially Emily Henry
in the way it makes you laugh, then makes you cry.
A tender exploration of human connection, and an
ode to finding yourself again. Equal parts heartbreaking
and heart-warming, Harriet and Wyn will redefine
your understanding of soulmates'
Brittany, @WhatBritReads

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'Every time I think I've found my new favourite Emily Henry book, she just proves me wrong! *Happy Place* was cinematic and wholesome and complex – it's my favourite book she's written and will stay with me forever. I haven't stopped thinking about it since finishing it'
Dais Grace, @thelibraryofdais

'This book made me believe in soulmates, reading Harriet and Wyn find their way back to each other was both heartbreaking and inspiring. Emily Henry gives us love through different relationships throughout the book and everyone is unique in their own way so you could relate on so many different levels. I loved every second of this book and could not put it down. Well done (as always) to Emily Henry for creating a found family masterpiece!'
Ellie Edmunds, @eleanormary_books

'Emily Henry can do no wrong! The whole book had a layer of sadness as well as the banter I know and love from Henry's previous books and the connection of the characters was perfection!'
Kerry-Louise Jones, @BookBeforeULeap

'A glorious slice of easy reading perfection, this is the second-chance romance that you won't want to miss'
Glamour

'Emily Henry's books are a gift; the perfect balance between steamy and sweet. The prose is effortless, the characters charming. The only downside is reaching the end'
V. E. Schwab, *The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue*

'Emily Henry's fans include Colleen Hoover, Taylor Jenkins Reid and Jodi Picoult and it's easy to see why. *Happy Place* is another witty novel brimming with perceptive insights into friendship and family dynamics'
Daily Express

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HAPPY PLACE

EMILY HENRY

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For Noosha, who made it safe to be me, and
who regularly answers the question "Why not?" with
"Because I don't want to." I love you, always.

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1

HAPPY PLACE

KNOTT'S HARBOR, MAINE

A COTTAGE ON the rocky shoreline, with knotty pine floorboards and windows that are nearly always open. The smell of evergreens and brine wafting in on the breeze, and white linen drapes lifting in a lazy dance. The burble of a coffee maker, and that first deep pull of cold ocean air as we step out onto the flagstone patio, steaming mugs in hand.

My friends: willowy, honey-haired Sabrina and wisp of a waif Cleo, with her tiny silver septum piercing and dip-dyed box braids. My two favorite people on the planet since our freshman year at Mattingly College.

It still boggles my mind that we didn't know one another before that, that a stodgy housing committee in Vermont matched the three of us up. The most important friendships in my life all came down to a decision made by strangers, chance. We used to joke that our living arrangement must be some government-funded experiment. On paper, we made no sense.

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Sabrina was a born-and-raised Manhattan heiress whose

wardrobe was pure Audrey Hepburn and whose bookshelves were stuffed with Stephen King. Cleo was the painter daughter of a semi-famous music producer and an outright famous essayist. She'd grown up in New Orleans and showed up at Mattingly in paint-splattered overalls and vintage Doc Martens.

And me, a girl from southern Indiana, the daughter of a teacher and a dentist's receptionist, at Mattingly because the tiny, prestigious liberal arts school gave me the best financial aid, and that was important for a premed student who planned to spend the next decade in school.

By the end of our first night living together, Sabrina had us lined up on her bed watching *Clueless* on her laptop and eating a well-balanced mix of popcorn and gummy worms. By the end of the next week, she'd had custom shirts made for us, inspired by our very first inside joke.

Sabrina's read *Virgin Who Can't Drive*.

Mine read *Virgin Who CAN Drive*.

And Cleo's read *Not a Virgin but Great Driver*. We wore them all the time, just never outside the dorm. I loved our musty room in the rambling white-clapboard building. I loved wandering the fields and forest around campus with the two of them, loved that first day of fall when we could do our homework with our windows open, drinking spicy chai or decaf laced with maple syrup and smelling the leaves curling up and dropping from branches. I loved the nude painting of Sabrina and me that Cleo made for her final figure drawing class project, which she'd hung over our door so it was the last thing we saw on our way out to class, and the Polaroids we taped on either side of it, the three of us at parties and picnics and coffee shops in town.

I loved knowing that Cleo had been lost in her work whenever

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her braids were pulled into her neon-green scrunchie and her clothes smelled like turpentine. I loved how Sabrina's head would tip back on an outright cackle whenever she read something particularly terrifying and she'd kick her Grace Kelly loafers against the foot of her bed. I loved poring over my biology textbooks, running out of highlighter as I went because *everything* seemed so important, breaking to clean the room top to bottom whenever I got stuck on an assignment.

Eventually, the silence would always crack, and we'd end up giggling giddily over texts from Cleo's prospective new girlfriend, or outright shrieking as we hid behind our fingers from the slasher movie Sabrina had put on. We were *loud*. I'd never been loud before. I grew up in a quiet house, where shouting only ever happened when my sister came home with a questionable new piercing or a new love interest or both. The shouting always gave way to an even deeper silence after, and so I did my best to head the shouting off at the pass, because I *hated* the silence, felt every second of it as a kind of dread.

My best friends taught me a new kind of quiet, the peaceful stillness of knowing one another so well you don't need to fill the space. And a new kind of loud: noise as a celebration, as the overflow of joy at being alive, here, now.

I couldn't have imagined being any happier, loving anywhere else as much.

Not until Sabrina brought us here, to her family's summer home on the coast of Maine. Not until I met Wyn.

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2

REAL LIFE

Monday

THINK OF YOUR happy place, the cool voice in my ear instructs.

Picture it. Glimmering blue washes across the backs of my eyes.

How does it smell? Wet rock, brine, butter sizzling in a deep fryer, and a spritz of lemon on the tip of my tongue.

What do you hear? Laughter, the slap of water against the bluffs, the hiss of the tide drawing back over sand and stone.

What can you feel? Sunlight, everywhere. Not just on my bare shoulders or the crown of my head but *inside* me too, the irresistible warmth that comes only from being in the exact right place with the exact right people.

Mid-descent, the plane gives another sideways jolt.

I stifle a yelp, my fingernails sinking into the armrests. I'm not a nervous flier, per se. But every time I come to *this* particular airport, I do so on a tiny plane that looks like it was made out of scrap metal and duct tape.

My guided meditation app has reached an inconvenient stretch

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of silence, so I repeat the prompt myself: *Think of your happy place, Harriet.*

I slide my window shade up. The vast, brilliant expanse of the sky makes my heart flutter, no imagination required. There are a handful of places, of memories, that I always come back to when I need to calm myself, but *this* place tops the charts.

It's psychosomatic, I'm sure, but suddenly I *can* smell it. I *hear* the echoey call of the circling gulls and *feel* the breeze riffle my hair. I taste ice-cold beer, ripe blueberries.

In mere minutes, after the longest year of my life, I'll be reunited with my favorite people in the world, in our favorite place in the world.

The plane's wheels clatter against the runway. Some passengers in the back burst into applause, and I yank out my earbuds, anxiety lifting off me like dandelion seeds. Beside me, the grizzled seatmate who'd snored through our death-defying flight blinks awake.

He looks at me from under a pair of curly white eyebrows and grunts, "Here for the Lobster Festival?"

"My best friends and I go every year," I say.

He nods.

"I haven't seen them since last summer," I add.

He harrumphs.

"We all went to school together, but we live in different places now, so it's hard to get our schedules to line up."

The unimpressed look in his eye amounts to *I asked one yes or no question*.

Ordinarily, I would consider myself to be a superb seatmate. I'm more likely to get a bladder infection than to ask a person to get up so I can use the lavatory. Ordinarily, I don't even wake someone up if they're asleep on my shoulder, drooling down my chest.

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I've held strangers' babies and farty therapy dogs for them. I've pulled out my earbuds to oblige middle-aged men who will perish if they can't share their life stories, and I've flagged down flight attendants for paper bags when the post–spring break teenager next to me started looking a little green.

So I'm fully aware this man in no way wants to hear about my magical upcoming week with my friends, but I'm so excited, it's hard to stop. I have to bite my bottom lip to keep myself from singing "Vacation" by the Go-Go's into this grumpy man's face as we begin the painfully slow deboarding process.

I retrieve my suitcase from the dinky airport's baggage carousel and emerge through the front doors feeling like a woman in a tampon commercial: overjoyed, gorgeous, and impossibly comfortable—ready for any highly physical activity, including but not limited to bowling with friends or getting a piggyback ride from the unobtrusively handsome guy hired by central casting to play my boyfriend.

All that to say, I am *happy*.

This is the moment that's carried me through thankless hospital shifts and the sleepless nights that often follow.

For the next week, life will be crisp white wine, creamy lobster rolls, and laughing with my friends until tears stream down our cheeks.

A short honk blasts from the parking lot. Even before I open my eyes and see her, I'm smiling.

"O Harriet, my Harriet!" Sabrina shouts, half falling out of her dad's old cherry-red Jaguar.

She looks, as ever, like a platinum Jackie O, with her perfectly toned olive arms and her classic black pedal pushers, not to mention the vintage silk scarf wrapped around her glossy bob. She still

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strikes me the same as that first day we met, like an effortlessly cool starlet plucked from another time.

The effect is somewhat tempered by the way she keeps jumping up and down with a poster board on which she's scrawled, in her god-awful serial-killer handwriting, *SAY IT'S CAROL SINGERS,* a *Love Actually* reference that could not, actually, make less contextual sense.

I break into a jog across the sunlit parking lot. She shrieks and hurls the poster at the car's open window, where it smacks the frame and flaps to the ground as she takes off running to meet me.

We collide in an impressively uncomfortable hug. Sabrina's exactly tall enough that her shoulder always finds a way to cut off my air supply, but there's still nowhere I'd rather be.

She rocks me back and forth, cooing, "You're heeeeere."

"I'm heeeeere!" I say.

"Let me look at you." She draws back to give me a stern once-over. "What's different?"

"New face," I say.

She snaps her fingers. "Knew it." She loops an arm around my shoulders and turns me toward the car, a cloud of Chanel No. 5 following us. It's been her signature scent since we were eighteen and I was still sporting a Bath & Body Works concoction that smelled like vodka-soaked cotton candy. "Your doctor does great work," she deadpans. "You look thirty years younger. Not a day over newborn."

"Oh, no, it wasn't a medical procedure," I say. "It was an Etsy spell."

"Well, either way, you look great."

"You too," I squeal, squeezing her around the waist.

"I can't believe this is real," she says.

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"It's been too long," I agree.

We fall into that hyper-comfortable kind of silence, the quiet of two people who lived together for the better part of five years and still, after all this time, have a muscle memory for how to share space.

"I'm so happy you could make this work," she says as we reach the car. "I know how busy you are at the hospital. Hospitals? They have you move around, right?"

"Hospitals," I confirm, "and nothing could have stopped me."

"By which you mean, you ran out of there mid–brain surgery," Sabrina says.

"Of course not," I say. "I *skipped* out of there mid–brain surgery. Still have the scalpel in my pocket."

Sabrina cackles, a sound so at odds with her composed exterior that the whole first week we lived together, I jumped every time I heard it. Now all her rough edges are my favorite parts of her.

She throws open the car's back door and tosses my suitcase in with an ease that defies her lanky frame, then stuffs the poster in after it. "How was the flight?"

"Same pilot as last time," I tell her.

Her brow lifts. "Ray? Again?"

I nod. "Of sunglasses-on-the-back-of-the-head fame."

"Never seen him without them," she muses.

"He absolutely has to have a second set of eyes in his neck," I say.

"The only explanation," she agrees. "God, I'm so sorry—ever since Ray got sober, I swear he flies like a dying bumblebee."

I ask, "How did he fly back when he was still drinking?"

"Oh, the same." She hops in behind the steering wheel, and I

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drop into the passenger seat beside her. "But his intercom banter was a fucking delight."

She digs a spare scarf out of the center console and tosses it at me, a thoughtful if ultimately meaningless gesture since my bun of chaotic dark curls is far beyond saving after three back-to-back flights and a dead sprint through both the Denver airport and Boston Logan.

"Well," I say, "there wasn't a pun to be found in those skies today."

"Tragic," she tuts. The car's engine growls to life. With a whoop, she peels out of the parking lot and points us east, toward the water, the windows down and sunlight rippling over our skin. Even here, an hour inland, yards are dotted with lobster traps, pyramids of them at the edges of lots.

Over the roar of the wind, Sabrina shouts, "HOW ARE YOU?"

My stomach does this seesawing thing, flipping from the absolute bliss of being in this car with her and the abject dread of knowing I'm about to throw a wrench into her plans.

Not yet, I think. *Let's enjoy this for a second before I ruin everything.*

"GOOD," I shout back.

"AND HOW'S THE RESIDENCY?" she asks.

"GOOD," I say again.

She glances sidelong, wisps of blond snaking out of her scarf to slap her forehead. "WE'VE BARELY SPOKEN IN WEEKS AND THAT'S ALL I GET?"

"BLOODY?" I add.

Exhausting. Terrifying. Electrifying, though not necessarily in a good way. Sometimes nauseating. Occasionally devastating.

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Not that I'm involved in much surgery. Two years into the residency, and I'm still doing plenty of scut work. But the slivers of time spent with an attending surgeon and a patient are all I think about when I clock out, as if those minutes weigh more than any of the rest.

Scut work, on the other hand, goes by in a flash. Most of my colleagues dread it, but I kind of like the mundanity. Even as a kid, cleaning, organizing, checking off little tasks on my self-made chore chart gave me a sense of peace and control.

A patient is in the hospital, and I get to discharge them. Someone needs blood drawn, and I'm there to do it. Data needs to be plugged into the computer system, and I plug it in. There's a before and an after, with a hard line between them, proof that there are millions of small things you can do to make life a little better.

"AND HOW'S WYN?" Sabrina asks.

The seesaw inside me jolts again. Sharp gray eyes flash across my mind, the phantom scent of pine and clove wafting over me.

Not yet, I think.

"WHAT?" I shout, pretending not to have heard.

This conversation is inevitable, but ideally it won't take place while we're going eighty miles an hour in a pop-can car from the sixties. Also, I'd rather have it when Cleo, Parth, and Kimmy are all present so I won't have to rip off the Band-Aid more than once.

I've already waited this long. What's a few more minutes?

Undeterred by the vortex of wind ripping through the car, Sabrina repeats, "WYN. HOW'S WYN?"

Electrifying, though not necessarily in a good way? Sometimes nauseating? Occasionally devastating.

"GOOD, I THINK." The *I think* part makes it feel less like a lie.

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He probably *is* good. The last time I saw him, he was virtually illuminated from within. Better than he had been in months.

Sabrina nods and cranks up the radio.

She shares the cottage, and its associated cars, with about twenty-five Armas cousins and siblings, but there's a strict rule about returning the radio presets to her dad's stations at the end of a stay, so our trips always begin with a burst of Ella Fitzgerald; Sammy Davis, Jr.; or one of their contemporaries. Today, Frank Sinatra's "Summer Wind" carries us up the pine-dotted drive to where the cottage perches atop a rocky cliff.

It never gets any less impressive.

Not the sparkling water. Not the cliffs. Certainly not the cottage.

Really, it's more like a mansion *swallowed* a cottage, and then wore its bonnet and imitated its voice in an unconvincing falsetto, Big Bad Wolf–style. At some point, probably closer to the year 1900 than to now, it was a family home. That part of it still stands. But behind it, and on either side of it, the expansions stretch out, their exteriors perfectly matched to the original building.

Off to one side there's a four-car garage, and across the creek on the other, a guesthouse sits tucked among the moss, ferns, and salt-gnarled trees.

The car glides right past the garage, and Sabrina cuts the engine in front of the front door.

Nostalgia, warmth, and happiness rush over me.

"Remember the first time you brought me and Cleo here?" I ask. "That guy Brayden had ghosted me, and you and Cleo made a PowerPoint about his worst qualities."

"Brayden?" She unbuckles her seat belt and hops out of the car. "Are you talking about *Bryant*?"

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I peel my thighs off the hot leather and climb out after her. "His name was *Bryant*?"

"You were convinced you were going to *marry* Bryant," Sabrina says, delighted. "Now you don't even remember the poor guy's name."

"It was a powerful PowerPoint," I say, wrestling my bag out of the back seat.

"Yeah, or it could have something to do with one Ms. Cleo James giving us free psychotherapy that whole week. My dad had just gotten engaged to Wife Number Three before we took that trip, remember?"

"Oh, right," I say. "She was the one with all the dogs."

"That was Number Two," Sabrina says. "And to be fair, she didn't have them all simultaneously. More like she had a revolving door that magically brought new designer puppies in as it swept her adult dogs straight back to the pound."

I shudder. "So creepy."

"She was, but at least I won the cousins' divorce betting pool that year. That's how I scored access to the cottage during Lobster Fest. Cousin Frankie's loss was our gain."

I clasp my hands together in a silent prayer of thanks. "Cousin Frankie, wherever you may be, we thank you for your sacrifice."

"Don't waste your gratitude. I think he lives on a catamaran in Ibiza these days." Sabrina yanks my bag free from the crook of my elbow, taking my hand to haul me up to the front door. "Come on. Everyone's waiting."

"I'm last?" I say.

"Parth and I got in last night," she says. "Cleo and Kimmy drove up this morning. We've all been sitting on our hands and vibrating, waiting for you to get here."

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"Wow," I say, "things descended into orgy territory pretty quickly."

Another Trademark Sabrina Laugh. She jiggles the doorknob. "I guess I should've specified we were all sitting on our *own* hands."

"Now, that changes things considerably," I say.

She cracks open the door and grins at me.

"Why are you looking at me expectantly?" I ask.

"I'm not," she says.

I narrow my eyes. "Aren't lawyers supposed to be good at lying?"

"Objection!" she says. "Speculative."

"Why aren't we going inside, Sabrina?"

Wordlessly, she nudges the door wider and gestures me through.

"Okaayyyy." I creep past her. In the cool foyer, I'm hit with the smell of summer: dusty shelves, sun-warmed verbena, sunblock, the kind of salty damp that gets into the bones of old Maine houses and never quite dries out again.

From the end of the first-floor hallway, back in the open kitchen–slash–living room (part of the extension, of course), I hear Cleo's soft timbre followed by Parth's low chuckle.

Sabrina kicks off her shoes and drops the keys on the console table, calling, "Here!"

Cleo's girlfriend, Kimmy, comes bounding down the hall first, a blur of curves and strawberry blond hair. "Harryyyy!" she cries, her tattooed fingers grabbing for my face as she plants loud kisses on each of my cheeks. "Is it really *you*?" She shakes me by the shoulders. "Are my eyes deceiving me?"

"You're probably confused because she got a new face on Etsy," Sabrina tells her.

"Huh," Kimmy says. "I was wondering what Danny DeVito was doing here."

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"That probably has more to do with the edibles," I say.

Kimmy doesn't cackle; she guffaws. Like every one of her laughs is Heimliched out of her. Like she's constantly being caught off guard by her own joy. She's the newest addition to our little unit by years, but it's easy to forget she hasn't been there since day one.

"I missed you so much," I tell her, squeezing her wrists.

"Missed you more!" She claps her hands together, her red-gold bun wobbling like an overeager pom-pom. "Do you *know*?"

"Know what?"

She glances at Sabrina. "Does she know?"

"She does not."

"Know *what*?" I repeat.

Sabrina threads an arm through mine. "About your surprise." On my right, Kimmy catches my other elbow, and together, they perp-walk me down the hall.

"What surpri—"

I stop so hard and fast that my elbow hits Kimmy's ribs. I only dimly register her grunt of pain. My senses are fully concerned with the man rising from the marble breakfast bar.

Dark blond hair, broad shoulders, a mouth improbably soft when compared to the hard lines that make up the rest of his face, and eyes that shine steel gray from afar but, I know from experience, are ringed in mossy green once you get up close.

Like, for example, when you're tangled with him beneath a blush sheet, the diffused glow of your bedside lamp painting his skin gold and giving his whisper a texture.

His shoulders are relaxed, his face totally calm, like being in the same room as me is *not* the worst thing that could have possibly happened to either of us.

Meanwhile, I'm basically a walking, breathing bottle of soda

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into which a Mentos has been plopped, panic fizzing up, threatening to spew out between my cells.

Go to your happy place, Harriet, I think desperately, only to realize I'm literally *in* my happy place, and he. Is. *Here*.

The very last person I expected to see.

The very last person I *want* to see.

Wyn Connor.

My fiancé.

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3

REAL LIFE

Monday

OKAY, SO HE'S not my fiancé *anymore*, but (1) our friends don't know that yet and (2) when you're engaged to a person as long as *I* was to Wyn Connor, you don't stop accidentally thinking of him as your fiancé overnight.

Or, apparently, even over the course of months.

Which is how long we've kept up this ruse.

A ruse that was supposed to end this week, while I was here. Without him.

We'd hammered out the details over a competitively cordial email exchange, how we'd take turns on trips like our friends were the children caught in our would-be divorce.

He *insisted* I get the first trip. So *why* is he here, standing between Parth and Cleo in the kitchen like the grand prize on some ill-conceived game show?

"Sur-*priiiiise*!" Sabrina sings.

I gape. Gawk. Freeze, while the seesaw in my chest swings back and forth with the force of a well-manned catapult.

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His hair has grown long enough to be tucked behind his ears, a sure sign that the family furniture repair business has been swamped, and he's grown a beard too, but it doesn't soften the hard line of his jaw *or* firm up his pouty lips. I'm still painfully aware of the way the right half of his Cupid's bow sits higher than the left. At least his dimples are somewhat hidden.

"Hello, *honey*." His smoky velvet voice makes it sound like he's feeding me lines in a salacious stage play.

This man has never once called me *honey*. He never even calls me Harry, like our friends do. Once, when I had a terrible flu, he called me *baby* in such a tender voice, my feverish brain decided it would be a good time to burst into tears. Aside from that, it's always been strictly Harriet. Whether he was laughing or frustrated, peeling off my clothes or ending our relationship in a four-minute phone call.

As in *Harriet, I think we both know where this is going*.

"Awh!" Kimmy squeals. "Look at her! She's speechless!"

More like my frontoparietal network is short-circuiting. "I . . ."

Before I can land on word number two, Wyn crosses the kitchen, ropes an arm around my waist, and hauls me up against him.

Stomach to stomach, ribs to ribs, nose to nose. Mouth to mouth.

Now my whole brain seems to be on fire, random pieces of data flying at me like Hitchcockian crows: The taste of cinnamon toothpaste. The quick thrum of a heartbeat. The rasp of an unshaven cheek. The soft brush of lips, once with purpose.

HE'S KISSING ME, I realize, full seconds after the kiss has ended. My legs are watery, all my joints mysteriously vanished. Wyn's arm tightens around me as he draws back, his grip very likely the only thing keeping me from face-planting onto the Armases' knotty pine floors.

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"Surprise." His gray eyes communicate something more akin to *Welcome to hell; I'll be your host, the devil.*

Everyone's watching, waiting for me to say something a bit more effusive than *I . . .*

I manage to squeak out, "I thought you couldn't get away."

"Things changed." His eyes flash, his mouth twisting unhappily.

"He means Sabrina bullied him," Parth cuts in, lifting me off the ground in a bear hug so tight it makes me cough.

Sabrina tosses my bag onto the ground. "I like to think of it as problem-solving. We needed Wyn here for this. We got him here."

People like to say opposites attract, and sure, that's true—Wyn's the restless and calloused son of two ex-ranchers, and I'm a surgical resident whose most torrid fantasy of late is mopping alone in the dark.

But Parth and Sabrina are one of those couples cut from the same oddly specific cloth. Like his girlfriend, Parth's a Photoshop good-looking (thick, dark hair with a wave; strong jaw; perfect white smile), type A lawyer with a long-term signature scent (Tuscan Leather, Tom Ford). Despite all their similarities, it took the two of them a ridiculously long time to accept that they were in love with each other.

"You don't call, you don't write!" Parth teases.

"I know, I'm sorry," I say. "It's been so hectic."

"Well, you're here now." He tousles my hair. "And you look . . ."

"Tired?" I guess.

"That's just her new face," Kimmy says, popping up onto a stool and stuffing her hand into a bag of Takis Fuego on the counter.

"You look *gorgeous*." Cleo squeezes past Parth to hug me, her subdued lavender scent folding around me as her head tucks neatly beneath my chin. Even the height differences between Cleo, Sabrina,

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and me always seemed like proof we belonged together, balanced one another out.

"Of *course* gorgeous," Parth says, "but I was going to say *hungry*. You want a sandwich or something, Har?"

"Takis?" Kimmy holds the shiny purple bag out in my direction.

"I'm good!" my mouth says.

You are VERY bad, actually, my brain argues.

Cleo frowns. "You sure? You do look sort of peaked."

Sabrina ducks her head. "They're right, Har. You're, like . . . milk colored. You okay?"

No, actually I feel like I'm going to puke and pass out, and I'm not sure in which order, and having everyone's undivided attention and *worry* on me is making things a hundred times worse, while the feeling of *his* undivided attention is pure torture.

"I'm fine!" I say.

Just furiously wishing I'd opted to put on a bra before my flight, or styled my hair, or maybe even just spilled a bit less mustard down my boobs whilst eating that airport hot dog.

Oh god. He's not supposed to be here!

The next time I saw him, I was supposed to be in a sexy Reformation dress with a hot new boyfriend and a full face of makeup. (In this fantasy, I'd also learned how to apply a full face of makeup.) Most importantly, I was supposed to have no perceivable reaction to him.

Shit, shit, shit. As badly as I've wanted to avoid imploding our friend group over the past few months since the breakup, I now just as badly need to get the truth out so I can get *away* from him.

"There's something I need—"

"*Honey*." Wyn's back at my side, his hands catching my waist as if in preparation to throw me over his shoulder and abscond if

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necessary. "Sabrina and Parth have something to tell you," he says pointedly. "To tell everyone."

My skin tingles under his grip. I'm suddenly convinced I'm not wearing any shorts, but nope, I can just magically feel his calloused fingers through the denim.

When I try to extricate myself, his fingertips sink into the curves of my hips. *Don't move*, his eyes warn.

Bite me, I try to make mine reply.

The right peak of his lips twitches irritably.

Sabrina is getting a bottle of champagne out of the stainless steel and glass refrigerator, but she doesn't look celebratory. She looks downright melancholy.

Parth goes to stand behind her, setting his hands on her shoulders. "We have a couple of announcements," he says. "And Wyn already knows, because, well, we had to give him the full picture so he understood why it was so essential that he's here this week. That all of us are."

"Oh my god!" Kimmy half screams, instantly ecstatic. "Are you two having a—"

"Oh *god*, no!" Sabrina says. "No. *No!* Definitely not. It's—it's the house." She pauses for a breath, then swallows and lifts her chin. "Dad's selling it. Next month."

The kitchen goes pin-drop silent. Not comfortable quiet, shocked quiet.

Cleo wilts onto a stool at the counter. Wyn's hands scrape clear of me, and he immediately puts several feet of distance between us, no longer considering me at risk of confessing, apparently.

I stand there, an astronaut untethered from her spaceship, drifting into nothingness.

I've already lost the person I expected to marry. I've already

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moved across the country from all my best friends. And now this house—*our house*, this pocket universe where we always belong, where no matter what else is happening, we're safe and happy—that's going away too.

All the panic I felt at finding myself trapped here with Wyn is instantly eclipsed by this new dread.

Our house.

Where, the summer after sophomore year, Cleo, Sabrina, and I slept in a row of mattresses we'd dragged to the middle of the living room floor and dubbed "super bed," staying up most nights talking and laughing until the first rays of sunrise spilled in from the patio doors.

Where Cleo whispered, as if it were a secret or a prayer, *I've never had friends like this*, and Sabrina and I nodded solemnly, the three of us holding hands until we drifted off.

The firepit out back where, in lieu of a blood pact (which struck me as dangerously unsanitary), the three of us had burned the same spot on our pointer fingers against the hot metal, then made ourselves laugh until we cried, concocting increasingly ridiculous scenarios where we could use our fingerprint scars to frame one another for various heists.

The wooden staircase on which Parth once orchestrated an elaborate cardboard luge race for us, and the little wood-paneled library in front of whose hearth Cleo first told us about a girl named Kimmy. The nail that stuck up from the pier where, a year later, Kimmy cut her foot open, and the rickety staircase Wyn had carried her up afterward while she demanded the rest of us chuck grapes at her open mouth, fan her with invisible palm fronds.

And *Wyn*.

The first time I kissed him.

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The first time I touched him, period. *Here.*

This house is all that's left of us.

"This will be our last trip." Sabrina tugs her scarf from her head and tosses the slip of silk across the counter. "Our last trip here, anyway."

The words hang in the air. I wonder if the others are also scrambling for a solution, like maybe if we pass around a hat and combine our spare change, we'll find six million dollars to buy a vacation home.

"Can't you—" Kimmy begins.

"No," Sabrina cuts her off. "Wife Number Six doesn't want Dad to have it, since he bought it with my mom, I guess. Never mind that there are four more-recent wives she could fixate her jealousy on." She rolls her eyes. "Dad's already got a buyer lined up and everything. It's a done deal."

Parth rocks Sabrina's shoulders, trying to shake her out of the dark mood.

My gaze wanders toward Wyn, a subconscious part of me still expecting the sight of him to drain away my stress.

Instead, the second our eyes meet, my heart starts jackhammering. I look away.

"It's not all bad news, though," Parth says. "We actually have some good news too. Amazing news."

Sabrina looks up from the champagne she's been de-foiling. "Right. There's something else."

"*Oh, right, there's something else*," Parth mimics, teasing. "Don't treat our engagement like a sidebar."

"Your *what*?"

At first I'm not sure who shrieked it.

Me. I shrieked it.

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Well, me *and* Cleo, who shoots up from her stool so fast, she knocks it over and has to catch it against the island with her hip.

Sabrina's cackle is halfway between giddy and disbelieving.

"Your *what*?" I repeat.

"Dude, I know," she says. "I'm as surprised as you are."

Kimmy snatches Sab's hand and gasps at the gigantic emerald winking on her ring finger.

Which is approximately when I realize that someone's going to notice my missing engagement ring.

I stuff my hands in my pockets. Very natural. Just a girl with her fists in her tiny, useless women's shorts pockets.

"You said you'd *never* get married," Cleo says with a scrupulous dent between her brows, eyeing the gemstone and its white-gold mount. "Under any circumstances. You said 'not with a gun to my head.'"

And who could blame her? Even setting her father's trail of ex-wives aside, Sabrina is a divorce attorney. She spends eight hours a day, at minimum, surrounded by reasons *not* to get married.

"Tell us the story," Kimmy says as Cleo continues, "You once told me you'd rather spend five years in prison than one year as a wife."

"Babe!" Kimmy pokes Cleo in the ribs. "We're *celebrating*. Sabrina changed her mind. People do that, you know."

People do; Sabrina Armas doesn't.

Sometimes I'll go back and forth about what I want for breakfast for so long that it's already lunch. Sabrina eats the same exact yogurt and granola every day, the only variation being whatever seasonal fruit she adds.

Sabrina coils an arm around Parth's waist. "Yeah, well. Finding out we'd be saying goodbye to the cottage cleared some stuff up

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for me." Her voice gives the slightest waver before going steely again. "Whether Parth and I are married or not, I'm in this for the long haul, and I'm tired of trying to be smart at the expense of my own happiness. I want this to be forever, and I don't want to pretend that's not what I want."

Kimmy sets a hand across her chest. "That's beautiful."

Parth smiles down at Sabrina, rubbing her shoulder tenderly. Her eyes light on me, a grin spreading over her classic-red lips. "And honestly, we were kind of inspired . . ."

It feels like the moment before a car accident, when the tires have started to hydroplane and you know something terrible is likely coming, but there's still a chance the tread will find purchase and you'll never know what agony you narrowly avoided.

And then Sabrina goes on.

"I mean, look at Harry and Wyn. They've been together like ten years, and they're making it work, even while they have to be long distance. Clearly love actually can conquer all."

"Eight years," Wyn corrects quietly.

Kimmy squeezes his bicep. "Eight *years*, and you're still never more than three feet apart."

By my estimation, Wyn is approximately two feet eleven and three-quarters inches from me when she says this, but at the comment, he hooks an arm around my neck and says, "Yeah, well, even after all these years, Harriet has a way of making me feel like we've just met."

Kimmy clutches her heart again, missing the irony he intended only for me.

A whoop goes up around the room as Sabrina pops the champagne's cork. I feel like I'm floating over my own body. Adrenaline is doing *weird* things to me.

Normally, I'd rather roll down a mountainside covered in

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broken glass and sticky traps than create conflict, but the longer this goes on, the harder it's going to be to get out of our lie.

"That's amazing." My voice lifts two and half octaves. "But I have to tell you—"

"Harriet." And there he is again, at my side with arms coming around me from behind and his chin resting atop my head, and now, when *Think of your m*****f****** happy place* flashes through my mind, all I can think is, *If only I were still on Sober Ray's death trap airplane!*

"That's not," Wyn goes on, "the end of the announcement."

Again Kimmy claps her hands together on a gasp.

"Still not pregnant," Sabrina says.

Kimmy sighs.

Parth's beaming with his very distinct *I've got an amazing surprise for you* smile. The one that preceded the New Orleans–themed birthday he threw for Cleo, or the moment he presented me with the stethoscope he'd gotten engraved as a med school graduation present.

He and Sabrina share a knowing smirk.

"Oh, come on," Cleo says.

Kimmy throws two Takis at Sabrina's head.

She swats them away. "Fine, fine! Tell them."

"We're getting married," Parth says.

Confused looks are exchanged throughout the room.

"That's . . . usually what follows an engagement," Cleo says.

"No, I mean on Saturday," he clarifies. "We're getting married. Here, with the six of us. Nothing fancy. Literally a little ceremony down on the dock, with all our best friends."

My whole body goes icy cold, then blisteringly hot. My face and hands are numb.

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Wyn releases his hold on me *again*, and when my gaze slices up toward his, I see my own misery reflected on his face.

We're trapped here.

My ears ring, my friends' voices becoming a muffled warble. A blue Estelle champagne flute is forced into my tingling fingers for a toast, and my hearing clears enough to catch Parth crying, "To everlasting love!"

And Sabrina adding, "And our best friends forever! There's no other way we'd want to spend this last week at the cottage."

GO TO YOUR G.D. HAPPY PLACE, HARRIET, I think, followed by, *NO, NOT THAT ONE*.

Too late.

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4

HAPPY PLACE

MATTINGLY, VERMONT

A STREET DOWNTOWN lined in old redbrick buildings. An apartment over the Maple Bar, our favorite coffee shop, for our junior year. Cleo and I have met our new roommate Parth only once, but Sabrina had a class on international law with him last spring, and when he told her rooms were opening up in his place, we jumped.

He's a year ahead of us, a senior, and two of his roommates have already graduated, while the third, a business major, is spending the fall semester abroad in Australia. I'll take *his* room, because in the spring I'm doing a term in London. The other roommate and I can easily switch places over winter break.

Mattingly's a small school, so even though we don't *know* Parth Nayak, we know his reputation: the Party King of Paxton Avenue. Called such partly because he throws amazing themed parties but also because he has a habit of showing up at *other* people's parties with top-shelf liquor, a dozen beautiful friends, and an incredible playlist. He is a Mattingly legend.

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And living with him is great. Though he and Sabrina—both natural leaders—occasionally butt heads. The real Parth is better than the myth. It's not just that he's fun. He *loves* people. Loves throwing them parties, picking out perfect gifts, making introductions between people he thinks should meet, finding the quietest person in the room and bringing them into the thick of things. The world has never felt so kind, so positive. Like everyone is a potential friend, with something fascinating and brilliant to offer.

By the time I leave for London, I almost wish I were staying.

The city is gorgeous, of course, all that old stone and ivy blending seamlessly into sleek steel and glass. And thanks to the last semester, I'm more prepared than ever to socialize with strangers. Most nights, at least a handful of people from the study-abroad program go out for pints in one of Westminster's endless supply of pubs, or grab crispy fish-and-chips wrapped in newspaper and eat it as we walk along the Thames. On weekends, there are champagne picnics in sprawling gardens and day trips to art galleries, hours of browsing as many iconic London bookshops as possible—Foyles and Daunt Books and a whole slew of others on Cecil Court.

As time wears on, people couple off into friendships and relationships. That's how I escape the constant pining for my friends and our corner apartment overlooking Mattingly's redbrick downtown: I start spending more and more time with another American, named Hudson, and in those hours when we're studying—or *not* studying—I stop, if only for a while, imagining the seasons passing outside Parth, Cleo, Sabrina, and Mystery Roommate's bay window, the heaps of snow melting away to reveal a quilt of springy pale green and bursts of trout lily, wild geranium, bishop's-cap.

The closer summer gets, though, the less of a distraction Hudson

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offers. Partly because we're both obsessively studying for exams, and partly because the thing between us—this romance of necessity—is approaching its sell-by date, and we both know it.

My parents text me roughly five hundred times more than usual as my flight home nears.

Can't wait to hear all about the London program in a few weeks, Dad says.

Mom writes, The ladies at Dr. Sherburg's office want to take you out to lunch while you're here. Cindy's son is considering Mattingly.

Dad says, Saved a ten-part documentary on dinosaurs.

Mom says, Think you'll have time to help me get the yard cleaned up? It's a disaster, and I've been so swamped.

I'd hoped to have a quick trip to see them before flying back to Vermont, but they're so excited. I end up spending two months counting down the seconds in Indiana, and then fly directly to Maine to meet my friends for Lobster Fest.

My flight gets in late. It's already dark, the heat of the day long since replaced by a cold, damp wind. There are a couple of cars idling in the lot, headlights off, and it takes me a second to find the cherry-red sports car. Sabrina specifically got her driver's license so we could cruise around in it this summer.

But it's not Sabrina standing against the hood, face illuminated by the glow of a cell phone. He looks up. A square jaw, narrow waist, messy golden hair pushed up off his forehead except for one lock that falls across his brow the second our eyes meet.

"Harriet?" His voice is velvety. It sends a zing of surprise down my spine, like a zipper undone.

I've seen him in pictures of my friends over the last semester, and before that, on campus, but always from a distance, always on

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the move. This close, something about him seems different. Less handsome, maybe, but more striking. His eyes look paler in the cell phone's glow. There are premature crow's-feet forming at their corners. He looks like he's mostly made out of granite, except for his mouth, which is pure quicksand. Soft, full, one side of his Cupid's bow noticeably higher.

"A whole semester apart," I say, "and you look exactly the same, Sabrina."

Symmetrical dimples appear on either side of his mouth. "Really? Because I cut my hair, got colored contacts, and grew four inches."

I narrow my eyes. "Hm. I'm not seeing it."

"Sabrina and Cleo had one too many boxes of wine," he says. "Apiece."

"Oh." I shiver as a breeze slips down the collar of my shirt. "Sorry you got stuck with pickup duty. I could've scheduled a cab."

He shrugs. "I didn't mind. Been dying to see if the famous Harriet Kilpatrick lives up to the hype."

Being the object of his full focus makes me feel like a deer in headlights.

Or maybe like I'm a deer being stalked by a coyote. If he were an animal, that's what he'd be, with those strange flashing eyes and that physical ease. The kind of confidence reserved for those who skipped their awkward phases entirely.

Whereas any confidence *I* have is the hard-won spoils from spending the bulk of my childhood with braces and the haircut of an unfortunate poodle.

"Sabrina," I say, "tends to embellish." Weirdly, though, her descriptions of *him* didn't come close to capturing the man. Or maybe it was that because I knew she had a crush on him, I'd expected

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something different. Someone more polished, suave. Someone more like Parth, his best friend.

The corners of his mouth twitch as he ambles forward. My heart whirs as he reaches out, as if planning to catch my chin and turn it side to side for his inspection to prove that I've been oversold.

But he's only taking my bag from my shoulder. "They said you were a brunette."

My own snort-laugh surprises me. "I'm glad they spoke so highly of me."

"They did," he says, "but the only thing I can corroborate so far is whether you're a brunette. Which you're not."

"I am definitely a brunette."

He tosses my bag into the back seat, then faces me again, his hips sinking against the door. His head tilts thoughtfully. "Your hair's almost black. In the moonlight it looks blue."

"Blue?" I say. "You think my hair is *blue*?"

"Not, like, Smurf blue," he says. "Blue black. You can't tell in pictures. You look different."

"It's true," I say. "In real life, I'm three-dimensional."

"The painting," he says thoughtfully. "That looks like you."

I instantly know which painting he must be referring to. The one of me and Sabrina strewn out like God and Adam: Cleo's old figure drawing final. It hung in Mattingly's art building for weeks, dozens of strangers passing it daily, and I never felt so naked then as I do now.

"Very discreet way of letting me know you've seen my boobs," I say.

"Shit." He glances away, rubbing the back of his neck. "I sort of forgot it was a nude."

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